



To Choose or Not to Choose: EFL Teachers' and Learners' Perspectives on Information Overload

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This paper aimed to investigate the challenges EFL learners face due to the availability of too much information. Teaching and learning without the internet are almost impossible in the 21st century. With the advancement of technology, the internet has made it accessible for all types of learners from all fields to get information. As a result, the availability of the internet has made learners' lives easy, but at the same time, it throws them into an overwhelming situation. Accessing too much information can negatively affect the learners and burden them with it. Hence, to find out the attitudes of both teachers and students regarding this phenomenon, 22 EFL teachers and 65 students, both males and females at the Faculty of Languages & Translation, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia were chosen randomly to participate in this study. Two separate questionnaires were administered to them. The results showed that teachers and students opined that too much information supported learners in their studies, but it was not without its drawbacks. Students find it challenging when they have access to too much information. Based on the study results, the paper concludes with some recommendations about how both teachers and students can collaborate to avoid being burdened with too many resources.

Keywords: access, information overload, learners, teachers, technology

INTRODUCTION

Information overload refers to feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information presented. It refers to the situation where information exceeds the ability of a user to process and utilize it, resulting in negative feelings of failure. (Hong & Kim 2020; Zimmerman, 2018; Fan et al. 2021) It refers to a situation where abundant information is available, and users often need clarification about selecting the right source of information. In other words, it occurs when a large amount of information is available and beyond one's capacity to process is communicated. According to Shrivastav & Hilts

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(2013), information overload is a critical problem that affects one's ability to comprehend the subject matter. This happens because of the communication of a large amount of information and when users find it difficult to decide due to the high presence of information. With the advancement of technology, devices like smartphones and laptops are available in almost every house, and users of any gender or age can quickly access them. Learners can only think of learning something new with the help of the internet. The mobility of the learners is greater. Students can use their cell phones to receive and share notes and materials. They don't need a computer to download notes because a mobile phone with internet access can do this function anywhere and anytime. (Hanif, 2020) The internet has become indispensable to our lives. Suhaimi & Hussain (2017) state that in recent years information can be shared easily with others drowning users in excess information. Hence, the internet makes it easy for users to get information on anything within a few seconds. On the other hand, the same users are overwhelmed when too much information is available, making them unable to decide what to choose and what to leave out.

The problem of information overload is receiving more attention, but there are fewer deeper studies and empirical research on this problem, especially among university undergraduates (Suhaimi & Hussain, 2017). Bawden & Robinson (2020) state that "Information Overload is recognized clearly as a problem and the scientists would be overwhelmed, that they would be no longer able to control the huge quantities of possibly relevant material that were flowing from the internet, that science itself was under threat". Earlier research conducted by postgraduate researchers revealed that information overload shows a high potential to weaken the learning process. Too much information is a distraction, so learners face problems selecting the exact information due to stress which influences learners' performance and even causes some learners to stop or withdraw from the university (Mariamdarani & Veloo, 2017).

Numerous studies have been conducted on the problem of information overload. Regardless of age, occupation, or social status, most people experience information overload daily (Zimmerman, 2018). With the availability of the internet and various devices such as smartphones, laptops, and tabs, learners are more inclined to depend on the internet for learning and getting access to their learning materials. They rely on the internet more than the class lectures. This has been the trend for many years, and most learners believe it gives them the flexibility to collect information from various sources and keep them updated. Levy (2008) asserted that this explosion of technologies caused increased experiences of information overload, bringing the term to more prominent significance and use (2008).

Similarly, in teacher education, the quest for more successful ways of teaching is a constant endeavour. (Hali et al. 2021). Digital learning resources are also a promising medium and learning resource, especially in this millennial era where almost every student owns a sophisticated and compatible device (Nawi et al., 2020). Teachers in the 21st century must keep pace with the ongoing changes regarding information and cope with them. They are under pressure to provide the learners with the latest and the most recent information.

This is undoubtedly a positive step for both teachers and learners. In a study conducted by Aydin (2007), it has been pointed out that the internet plays a vital role in teaching and learning a foreign language. It allows students to be exposed to more authentic materials to be used in and outside class. However, the problem arises when students have access to an unlimited source of information. There is an ongoing debate about whether the internet acts as a bane or a boon. As stated by Suhaimi & Hussain (2017) in their study, the media revolution has brought many changes. We can get information through social media or other communication channels. Learners can select any source to get the information needed as, most of the time, there are no restrictions or boundaries set to control or monitor its accessibility. This unlimited and unmonitored accessibility can create enormous problems for learners when they cannot decide what to select and how much to select.

It is seen that learners at higher levels can sometimes make a selection as to what information should be selected and used. However, for beginners, this becomes challenging. They may get carried away or be drowned in too much information. Not only do learners face confusion, but sometimes due to the accessibility of too much information, they select the wrong or useless information, which may ultimately affect their academic performance. Hence, the present study aims to find out how teachers and students perceive this overwhelming situation and how the learners cope with it to get the proper guidance in selecting information.

Rationale of the Study

The use of the internet and having access to much information has been in practice for decades now. However, technology is not without its drawbacks. As much as it has helped people to be self-reliant and flexible, it has also created situations in which learners become doubtful because of unlimited sources of information. Hence, the researchers were interested in conducting a study on teachers' and students' perspectives regarding having access to too much information and its effects on learners.

Objectives of the Study

The present study's objectives are to find out how EFL teachers and students view the accessibility of too much information and how learners can overcome the challenges of being burdened with it.

Research Questions

1. What is the attitude of undergraduate EFL students toward the availability of a large amount of information?
2. What is the attitude of EFL teachers towards the availability of too much information and its effects on learners?
3. Do undergraduate EFL students face the challenges of being burdened with too much information?

Literature Review

Over the years, many studies have been conducted regarding information overload. Researchers have conducted their studies from various angles, including organization science, marketing, accounting, management information systems, business management, and psychology. (Edmunds & Morris 2000; Eppler & Mengis, 2004; Klausegger et al., 2007). Experts have stated that there is no fixed definition of information overload. According to Eppler & Mengis (2003), information overload is the concept of getting access to too much information. It is a form of cognitive barrier that blocks, limits, or hampers the information-seeking process, leading to frustration for the information user. As a result, users are unable to make decisions properly. In other words, when humans are exposed to even more information than their knowledge-processing capabilities can handle, they experience information overload (Matthes et al., 2020).

Ozkan & Tolon (2015) refer to the four dimensions of information overload. They have been categorized as information processing capacity, information quality, information quantity, and time availability. In their study, the capacity to process information was found to be the most vital dimension. Zimmerman (2018), in a study conducted on high school students, states that in recent times people suffer because the information is accessible and created at an extremely high pace. Similarly, Bawden and Robinson (2009) point out that the feeling of overload happens when there is a loss of control over the situation. This gives rise to a situation when information becomes a hindrance rather than helpful. When the availability of information increases, it shows its effect on the ability to process information, affecting the quality of making decisions. Because of having too much information, the ability to make decisions decreases. (Hoq, 2014). This view is similar to the issue pointed out by Zimmerman in the study, where it is mentioned that, due to too much information, even helpful information can have overwhelming effects on the receivers.

In their study, Zhang et al. (2022) discussed the overload of information due to the excessive availability of news. They point out that people face problems because of constant news updates on social media and smartphone applications. Too much information act as a distraction. Therefore, students face difficulty selecting the exact information due to stress which influences students' performance and even causes some students to stop or withdraw from university (Mariamdarani & Veloo, 2017). Kumaim et al. (2021) mention a few forms of information overload, such as having access to excessive online information resources, challenges people face in choosing the relevant information and lack of research skills. This is similar to the study by Huq (2014), which mentions that sometimes irrelevant information is more available than the relevant information. Bawden & Robinson (2009), in their study, discuss the availability of printed books, periodical magazines, journals, and the computer, which all lead to the problem of keeping up with the amount of information available. People have access to electronic media like websites, social networking sites, and blogs. As a result, due to a lack of adequate information literacy skills, most are distracted by excessive information.

In a study by Zhao et al. (2018), information overload occurs because of the rapid growth of online academic information. This view is supported by Ozkan & Tolon (2015), stating that the internet and various search engines are among the factors which contribute to information overload. Benselin & Ragsdell (2016,) point out that since smartphones have internet connectivity and are constantly within reach of teenagers, they suffer from information overload. Kumaim et al. (2021) conclude that IO can affect scholars' creativity and productivity, leading to inescapable suffering.

However, it is seen that teachers are also one of the factors contributing to the formation of overload. Teachers' and supervisors' proper guidance should be there so that students can handle the situation when they come across too much information and need help deciding what to choose and leave out. In a study by Islam et al. (2022), it is stated that in any learning, from time to time, teachers should supervise and monitor students' progress giving them constructive feedback. Kumaim et al. (2021) point out that if supervisors can project research topics with specific protocols and objectives, it can help students reduce the overloaded burden. This view is similar to those of (Draper & Harrison, 2011, and Okpala et al.2017). They support that it is the responsibility of skilled teachers or supervisors to guide and train the students/researchers in every step.

There are some debates in the previous literature, and some research report reveals that in some past studies, there was no confirmation of a decline in students' performance because of information overload in higher education (Mariamdarani & Veloo, 2017). On the other hand, positive views are expressed towards the availability of excess information. Currently, it is a trend to include as much technology as possible to prepare students for the challenges, mostly in the job market. Students feel they can benefit more when they are exposed to much information outside class lectures. In a study conducted by Asan & Koca (2006), it is found that most students have positive attitudes towards using the internet, which means getting access to unlimited sources of information.

These studies have discussed the causes and effects of information overload on learners. However, these studies have yet to show how teachers and undergraduate students view this phenomenon and how students can avoid being burdened with too much information. Hence the present study aims to find out the perspectives of teachers and students on information overload and how undergraduate EFL students can overcome the challenges.

METHOD

Participants

In this study, 22 EFL teachers, (10) males, and (12) females participated. The teachers had the experience of teaching at the tertiary level for more than five years. The questionnaire was sent to 40 teachers. Only 22 responded.

As for the students, 65 students (26) males and (39) females were enrolled in the B.A. program in English at the Faculty of Languages & Translation at King Khalid University in Saudi Arabia. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 years. They had been studying English for over 8 years. Their native language was Arabic.

Instruments

Two questionnaires were administered; the first consisting of 14 closed items for EFL teachers. All ordinal variables in the questionnaire were prepared on a 5-point Likert Scale, starting from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire was based on the observations and experiences of EFL teachers who teach at the tertiary level. Similarly, the second questionnaire consisting of 16 closed items, was administered to EFL students. All ordinal variables in the questionnaire were prepared on a 5-point Likert Scale, starting from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire was based on students' experiences using the internet for academic purposes. The researchers compiled the questionnaires with the help of the pre-existing literature. They were valid, as they were judged by five EFL experts in the Saudi context and university staff. Proper modifications were done due to their comments. Some changes were applied in the survey to suit the Saudi EFL setting.

Moreover, the researchers conducted a pilot study that lasted one month. The pilot study aimed at ensuring the clarity of instructions for the tools of the study. The samples of the pilot study were chosen randomly from both the students and the teachers. The questionnaires proved reliable through Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 and 0.79, respectively.

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

The questionnaire was constructed on Google forms. Its link was forwarded to teachers and students through Course messages, emails, and SMS on mobiles. Within two weeks, the data was collected. The study was conducted in the second semester of 2022.

Limitations of the Study

The study has some limitations. For this study, only 22 EFL teachers and 65 EFL students participated. Moreover, the study was conducted at only one university in Saudi Arabia. If the research participants had been more and the study had been conducted in other universities, the results might have been different. Because of ethical considerations, the names of the participants were kept anonymous. The participants were assured that the researchers would maintain the confidentiality of the respondents. This questionnaire would be used only for data collection and analysis. Therefore, there will be no pressure if the questionnaire is unfilled.

FINDINGS

After gathering the data, it was analyzed statistically using SPSS (Version 20.0). To answer the first question regarding the attitude of undergraduate EFL students toward the availability of a large amount of information, a tabulation of descriptive statistics: mean and standard deviation was prepared to determine the learners' views toward information overload. See Table 1

Table 1
Learners' perspectives on the availability of too much information

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I have to use the internet for all my courses.	3.94	1.254
2. Access to getting all the information makes my studies easy.	4.15	1.234
3. When I search the internet, I find too much information.	4.03	1.114
4. I get confused when I have to select the materials for my course.	3.12	1.365
5. The excess information distracts me from correctly using the textbook.	3.09	1.240
6. All books' materials are not always helpful and up to the standard.	3.32	1.273
7. I depend on the internet too much for my studies.	3.41	1.328
8. I rely on the internet more than the course books.	2.79	1.321
9. Depending too much on the internet affects my critical thinking and creativity.	3.35	1.041
10. When I surf the internet, I understand better.	3.71	1.142
11. I rely on the internet more than class lectures.	2.76	1.232
12. I sometimes don't understand the information I find online.	3.53	1.107
13. I feel course books are unimportant as all the information is available online.	2.62	1.393
14. I feel motivated to learn a course when I get a lot of information on the internet.	3.29	1.060
15. I manage to do my assignments because of the availability of relevant information on the internet.	3.88	1.008
16. While selecting information from the internet, I consult my course teachers/ supervisors.	3.38	1.326

The data revealed that the respondents support that the internet plays a vital role in their academic purpose. Out of the 16 variables, 13 opined that the internet has much use and depend on it for access to information. The participants supported the idea strongly as they scored 3 and above on a 5-point Likert scale. The highest score is seen in variable 2. in the statement *Access to getting all the information makes my studies easy* for which the mean score was 4.15. with S.D. 1.234. This means that the participants' answers clustered around the mean or no obvious dispersion.

In contrast, the lowest mean score is seen in variable 13. in the statement, *I feel course books have no importance as all the information is available online*, which is 2.62. with S.D. 1.393. This means the participants' answers were spread across the rating scale. This shows that though they support using the internet, they don't believe in discarding textbooks. Moreover, some participants also found obstacles while depending too much on the internet and unlimited source of information. Although they have a positive attitude towards using the internet and the benefits of accessing unlimited information, they are well aware of the drawbacks that affect them when they are burdened with too many resources.

To answer the second question regarding the attitude of EFL teachers toward the availability of too much information and its effects on learners, a tabulation of descriptive statistics: mean and standard deviation was prepared to determine the learners' views toward information overload.

Table 2
Teachers' perspectives on the availability of too much information

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Students should use the internet for all their courses.	4.00	1.265
2. Students should be encouraged to use the internet from the very beginning.	3.70	1.160
3. Having access to a lot of information on the internet helps them to perform better.	3.36	1.286
4. Students get distracted by the availability of too much information	3.73	1.104
5. Depending on the internet affects their learning habit.	3.45	1.214
6. Students feel encouraged to discard the book and rely heavily on the internet.	3.45	1.214
7. Too much reliance on the internet affects their critical thinking and creativity	4.27	1.009
8. Students form the habit of being inattentive to class lectures and depend on the internet.	3.55	1.214
9. Students become independent learners when they have access to much information.	3.18	1.328
10. Students feel more motivated to learn a course when they have access to much information.	3.27	1.104
11. All students can select materials from the internet correctly.	2.09	.944
12. All students have the same ability to absorb the information they come across.	2.18	1.250
13. The availability of a lot of information on the internet makes students take recourse to plagiarism.	4.18	.603
14. While selecting materials from the internet, students sometimes need to consult the course teachers/supervisors.	3.90	1.287

Out of the 14 variables, 12 supported that the internet has much use and students depend on it to access information. The participants supported the idea strongly as they scored 3 and above on a 5-point Likert scale.

The data revealed that the participants believe that students depend on the internet heavily for their studies. This means the answers of the participants were spread out across the rating scale. The highest score was seen in variable 7 in the statement, Too much reliance on the internet affects their critical thinking and creativity, which is 4.27 with SD 1.009. This means that the participants' answers clustered around the mean, or no obvious dispersion, whereas the lowest score was seen in variable 11. in the statement, All students can correctly select materials from the internet, which is 2.09. with S.D. 0.944. It shows that the teacher participants do not support the view that all students have the same ability to choose information and believe that the internet affects their critical thinking ability.

To answer the third question regarding whether undergraduate EFL students face the challenges of being burdened with too much information, according to Table 1, it is seen that for variables, 4, 5, 9, and 12 the mean score was (3.12, 3.09, 3.35, and 3.53) respectively. This shows students' predicament due to the accessibility of too much information. They express their confusion and distraction because of being overloaded with many resources. In addition, they agree that depending on the internet too much affects their critical thinking ability, and sometimes, it also leads to a failure to grasp the correct information. They need help deciding what to choose and what not to choose.

Hence it can be stated that though the learners have a positive attitude toward the use of having much information available, they cannot ignore the pitfalls of being burdened with it. They are aware of the drawbacks of being overloaded with information in the digital era.

In table two, it is to be mentioned that variables 4, 5, 7, 8, 13, and 14 show that the teachers support the idea that too much information negatively affects the learners. The mean score for these variables is (3.73, 3.45, 4.27, 3.55, 4.18, and 3.90) respectively. These variables support the view that too much information causes distraction to students and affects their learning habits. It also affects their critical thinking ability, which results in a loss of attention in class. Sometimes they recourse to plagiarism when they find all information readily available on the internet. Due to this, they sometimes consult their course teachers or supervisors to get proper guidance.

Hence it can be stated that the teachers agree that when learners have access to too much information, this can throw them into overwhelming situations. An overload of information causes them confusion and distraction and affects their learning habit.

DISCUSSION

The results revealed that most undergraduate EFL learners find that having access to too much information helps them in their studies. They depend heavily on the internet for their courses as they can find much information that helps them understand their courses better. Moreover, the participants showed positive attitudes stating that they feel motivated and confident when they get much information on the internet and can manage to work on their assignments or projects better. This is similar to the view shared by Asan & Koca (2016), who point out that most students have positive attitudes toward using the internet, which means getting access to unlimited sources of information. It gives them the autonomy to work alone or in groups, making them independent.

On the other hand, they have also pointed out the drawbacks of the availability of too much information and the overwhelming effects it has. The learners have stated that sometimes they get confused while selecting materials for their courses when they get too much information. They also get distracted because of the availability of unnecessary information. Similarly, Bawden and Robinson (2009) point out that the feeling of overload happens when there is a loss of control over the situation. This gives

rise to a situation when information becomes a hindrance rather than helpful. They also view that their critical thinking skill gets affected, and sometimes they need help understanding all the information to which they have access. Being over burned with it, sometimes for undergraduate EFL learners, it becomes challenging to decide what to choose and leave out. Similar views are shared in the study, which points out that when the availability of information increases, it shows its effect on the ability to process information, affecting the quality of decisions. Because of having too much information, the ability to make decisions decreases. (Hoq, 2014). Too much information act as a distraction. Therefore, students face problems selecting the exact information due to stress, which influences performance and even causes some students to stop or withdraw from university (Mariamdarani & Veloo, 2017). Suhaimi & Hussain (2017) agree in their study, stating that in recent years information can be shared easily with others drowning users in excess information. Hence, the internet makes it easy for users to get information on anything quickly. On the other hand, the same users are overwhelmed when too much information is available, making them unable to decide what to choose and what to leave out. Kumaim et al. (2021) conclude that IO can affect scholars' creativity and productivity, leading to inescapable suffering.

However, looking at teachers' perspectives, it is seen that teachers also support the view that students struggle when they come across too much information. The participants agree that students should be encouraged to use the internet from the beginning and for all their courses as it helps them perform better. They are motivated to study a course and become autonomous learners. However, there are pitfalls of being too much dependent on the internet for information. According to the views expressed by the teacher participants, it is seen that they are aware of the distractions which students have because of the availability of unlimited sources. This is similar to the view expressed by Huq (2014) when he states that people have access to electronic media like websites, social networking sites, and blogs. They can come across information just with a click. Sometimes depending on the internet heavily affects their critical thinking and creativity and impacts their learning habits. As a result, they tend to discard textbooks and depend on the internet, making them inattentive in class.

In addition, all students cannot select and absorb information when there is an abundance of it. They are over-burned with it and are at a loss. In such situations, they need proper guidance. This is similar to the view expressed by (Draper & Harrison, 2011, & Okpala et al.2017). They support that it is the responsibility of skilled teachers or supervisors to guide and train the students/researchers in every step. Similarly, Islam et al. (2022) state that from time to time, teachers should supervise and monitor students' progress giving them constructive feedback. They need the guidance of teachers or supervisors so that they do not recourse to plagiarism.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

In the 21st century, teaching and learning are incomplete without technology. It is indispensable to our everyday life. The availability of laptops, tabs, and smartphones has made it accessible for people from all walks of life to access the internet. However, with

the rapid increase in technology and the numerous available sources, it becomes challenging for undergraduate students to decide which sources to use to access information. An abundance of information tends to overpower learners' ability to make proper decisions. All learners have different abilities to absorb information. They switch from one source to the other and, as a result, are thrown into the pool of information. It is best to get guidance from teachers and supervisors in situations like this. Experienced supervisors can help solve these challenges by training learners to use proper search tools and be selective about choosing the right sources. It is an effort for both the teachers and the learners. With appropriate guidance and supervision, learners can be skilled in surviving in an era dominated by technology. They can use their knowledge, skills, and expertise and successfully face the challenges of information overload in the 21st century.

Having discussed students' and teachers' perspectives regarding IO, the researchers have come up with certain recommendations to face the challenges. Learners must first be aware of the various search engines appropriate for their courses. Before surfing the internet, they should consult the textbooks and take notes from class lectures. They must be selective about using materials from unlimited sources and consult their teachers or supervisors for guidance. Teachers must train the students in research skills and set certain criteria regarding plagiarism to discourage students from being heavily dependent on the internet. Teachers must assign tasks to students on which they will only practice their critical thinking skills. Students should be assigned more in-class activities to discuss and share ideas with their peers instead of relying on the internet.

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